Whenever we would collide

—"I died a thousand times, I did what I had to do

Hey, that's just how it goes, I'm still coming back to you."

Gorillaz, Kali Uchis - She's My Collar

William had not slept. This was not unusual. His body had a complicated relationship with rest. He sat on the floor of his studio apartment—which was smaller than any of the others' spaces but arranged with the compulsive precision of someone who had learned that control of environment was the closest thing to control of self. The apartment was a study in restraint: white walls, minimal furniture, a single shelf holding his cameras like artifacts in a museum. Everything had a place. Everything had a purpose. Everything except the memory that had taken root in his chest and was slowly, relentlessly, growing.

The camera sat on the shelf. Untouched since Saturday night.

The last frame on that roll was Est. Not Est the runaway model, not Est the subject of a hundred internet debates. William had seen it happen from across the venue, through the crowd, through the red and pink light that turned everything into a Valentine's fever dream. Est had been standing on the second-floor balcony, watching Lego's performance, and something in his posture had shifted—the spine straightening, the shoulders changing angle, the face reflecting something that wasn't performance.

And William could only watch him from a distance.

Across the city, in a spacious industrial apartment that smelled of green soap and expensive incense, Nut was doing pull-ups.

Nut's morning routine was as precise and unavoidable as gravity: wake at 8:30 AM, drink water, meditate for ten minutes, then the pull-ups. Every morning. The pull-ups were how Nut thought. The rising and falling of his body weight, the burn in his shoulders and lats, the moment at the top of each pull when his chin cleared the bar—that was where the thinking happened. His shoulders burned now. The small tattoos along his ribs—stretched and compressed with each repetition. He dropped to the floor. His bare feet made no sound on the concrete.

The espresso machine hissed in the kitchen. Nut poured the shot into a ceramic cup—a gift from Lego, handmade, glazed in soft pink—and stood at the window. The view was unremarkable by Bangkok standards: the back of another building, a narrow alley, a sliver of sky the color of old paper. But Nut had trained himself to find value in unremarkable things. The alley was where the neighborhood cats

gathered at dawn, a silent parliament of orange and gray and calico fur. The building opposite had a cracked window on the fourth floor that caught the sunrise and turned it into a brief, accidental stained glass.

He watched the light move. Drank the coffee. Thought about Hong.

This was also not unusual.

Nut had been thinking about Hong, in some form or another, for eight years. Not the consuming, disruptive thoughts of infatuation—those had burned through him when they were fifteen, when Hong was just a kid with dark eyes and a laugh that sounded like breaking glass, beautiful and dangerous. The burn had been total, the kind that leaves scars.

No. What Nut felt now was more like the awareness of a permanent weather system. Hong was a season that never fully changed. He was winter sun—bright but not warm, present but unable to thaw. They had never named it. That was the agreement, unspoken and absolute, forged in the year when they were fifteen and sixteen and had shared a relationship built on late-night whispers and stolen moments in spaces that smelled of turpentine and cheap coffee. Hong's family's silence had been thicker than Nut's. They had learned to love in a register that was below human hearing—felt in the body, never spoken aloud.

And then it had ended. Abruptly. The way things end when you're young and the world hasn't taught you yet that some things can be set down gently. Hong had left for China, then come back different—sharper, grayer, his hair a chemical silver and his laugh rewired from breaking glass to something more controlled, like a knife being unsheathed slowly.

Nut had absorbed the loss the way he absorbed everything: internally.

Now they were this. Friends. Brothers. The two points of a line that never quite met but never diverged. They orbited the same people—Lego, Tui, William—and the gravity of those shared loves kept them close enough to touch but too cautious to reach.

The phone buzzed.

Hong: You up?

Nut: Always.

Hong: Liar. You sleep like the dead when you're tired.

Hong: I need a session.

Hong had been slowly adding to the gray peony that ran from his waist down his hip, almost to his thighs. The flower was a map. Nut kept a file for every inch of it—

sketches, studies, notes about placement and flow and how the petals should move with Hong's body's movement.

Nut: When?

Hong: Today? If you're free.

Hong: Need to add the stem. The lines are eating me up.

Nut understood what that meant. The lines were eating him up meant the silence was becoming unbearable. It meant there was something Hong needed to say but could only say through ink, through the needle, through the specific intimacy of a tattoo session where touch was permitted and feeling came third. Feeling always came third. That was the rule. Without the rule, the feelings would come first, and then there would be no art and no anatomy. Just the unbearable awareness of Hong's skin under his gloved hands and the memory of a time when the gloves weren't necessary.

Nut: Come at 2. Eat first.

Hong: Yes, mom.

Nut: I mean it. Last time you almost passed out.

Hong: That was ONE time.

Nut: Twice.

Hong: fine. I'll eat.

Nut set the phone down and looked at his hands. The fingernails were clean. He opened the drawer where he kept Hong's design file. It was thicker than any other client's. Pages and pages of sketches, variations, studies of the peony from different angles, different light sources, different stages of bloom. The flower was not just a flower. It was a map of every year they'd known each other, every silence they'd shared, every touch they'd withheld.

He closed the drawer and went to sterilize the equipment.

At 2:00 PM, Hong arrived at Nut's studio.

"Did you eat?" Nut said, without preamble, without the usual greeting that other people used.

"Hello to you too."

"Did you eat."

Hong sighed. "I had a rice bowl."

"The one with the—"

"Yes, it had vegetables. Yes, I finished it. Do you want photographic evidence? A before and after? A time-lapse video?"

Nut's mouth did something that was not quite a smile. The studio was exactly as it always was. The green soap smell was layered with the expensive incense Nut burned during sessions—not for clients, but for himself. The scent helped him enter the headspace where his hands became instruments rather than appendages. Where the needle became a brush. Where the body on the chair became a canvas.

Nut gestured to the chair. Hong moved toward it with the practiced ease of someone who had been in this position before in a ritual that was as intimate as anything either of them had ever done with anyone else, and more honest than most.

Hong pulled the tank top over his head. The gray peony was there, exactly where Nut had left it: starting just below the ribs on the left side, the petals unfurling across the waist, the curves of the flower following the contours of Hong's body, the ink seeming to grow from the skin rather than sit on it.

The stem was the next phase.

Hong lay on his side, his right arm tucked under his head. Nut sat on his stool and rolled closer. He pulled on the black nitrile gloves. Nut placed the stencil. His gloved fingers pressed the paper against Hong's hip, smoothing it with the flat of his thumb, and Hong's skin was warm underneath.

"Ready?" Nut asked.

"Yeah."

The needle hummed to life. The familiar, bee-like buzz that Nut had learned to love.

"How does that feel?" Nut asked as he dipped the needle.

"Like you're asking me about a stencil and not about my life."

"I'm asking about both."

Hong was quiet for a moment while Nut drew. The needle moved along the stencil line—down the oblique, toward the hip. The ink was a deep charcoal gray, the same shade as the darkest petals of the peony.

"Est messaged me this morning." Hong said.

Nut continued to draw. The line was steady, certain, permanent. "You were worried

about him."

"I was worried about all of it. The party. The way he looked. The way William—" Hong stopped. The name landed in the studio like a stone in a pond.

Nut continued to draw. The needle moved along the stencil line. "What about William?" Nut asked.

"He was watching. Not with his camera. With his whole face." Hong paused. "Lego noticed too."

"Lego notices everything."

"This was different. William was watching Est the way—" Hong exhaled through the pain. "The way someone watches a sunset when they know it won't last."

Nut's hand didn't falter. The line continued. Steady, certain, permanent. "And that worries you." Nut said.

"It worries me because Est doesn't know. Because William won't tell him. Because both of them are the kind of people who will stand on opposite sides of a room and ache without ever closing the distance, and I—" Hong turned his head slightly to look at Nut. Their eyes met, and in that meeting was every year, every silence, every late-night whisper and every abrupt ending. The whole history of two people who had loved each other at fifteen and had spent the rest of their lives learning what to do with the aftermath.

"You don't want to watch people waste time." Nut said quietly. "Neither do I."

The words sat between them. Neither looked away. Then Hong looked away. And Nut looked at the line. And the moment passed, the way their moments always passed —incomplete, suspended, held in the amber of unfinished business.

"He'll figure it out," Nut said, and it was unclear whether he meant William or Est or himself or all three, occupying the same space, the same confusion, the same inability to move forward or backward, only sideways, always sideways.

"When?" Hong asked.

"When he's ready."

Nut wiped the excess ink with a steady hand. The line continued to develop—the stem taking shape, the peony acquiring the structure it needed to stand.

The university's photography lab was on the third floor of the arts building—a long, narrow room with fluorescent lights that hummed. The lab was divided into two halves: the digital side, with its rows of calibrated monitors and editing stations, and

the analog side, with its darkroom door and its chemical smell.

William was in the digital half.

This was not where he wanted to be. Where he wanted to be was the darkroom, with the red light and the developer trays and the slow, alchemical process of coaxing an image out of silver and time. So he was here. In the digital half. The images filled his monitor. Three hundred and forty-seven frames from Saturday night.

Lego in the air. Lego catching the silk. Lego's hands—the long nails, the grip, the tendons standing out under the stage lights. The crowd below: faces turned upward, mouths open, the collective gasp of three hundred people watching a body defy gravity.

And then—

The other frames. Est at the bar. Est's hand around a glass. Est's jaw in the red light. Est's shoulder, the line of it visible through the reddish-brown jacket, the fabric pulling slightly at the seam as he leaned forward to hear something Hong was saying.

William stared at the screen.

He should delete them. They were personal documentation of a person William had no right to document, carrying a camera and intruding on a moment that Est had not consented to have captured.

William's hand moved to the delete key.

He didn't press it.

"Will." The voice was behind him, real, present, impossible to ignore.

William's spine went rigid. His hand shot from the keyboard to the mouse, clicking—clicking what? The minimize button. The close button. Something. Anything.

He turned around.

Tui was standing three feet behind him, one hand on the back of William's chair, the other holding a coffee. He was wearing a baggy, ripped gray t-shirt over a black mesh top and baggy black jeans. His reading glasses were pushed up on his forehead—the position they usually occupied when he wasn't reading, when he was just existing in the world.

"You're doing it again." Tui said.

"Doing what?" William's voice came out low, raspy from hours of silence.

Tui took a sip of his coffee. The cup was secondhand, an old Starbucks cup, a 2019 collaboration that had probably cost a dollar at a thrift store.

"Sorry," William said. He rubbed his eyes. "What were you saying?"

"I wasn't saying anything. I just got here. But the fact that you assumed I'd been talking and you missed it tells me everything I need to know about where your head is." Tui pulled a chair from the adjacent desk and sat down, the chair rolling slightly on the lab's linoleum floor. "William, it's 4 PM. You're the only one here."

William looked around. Tui was right. The lab was empty—the other students gone, the monitors dark, the fluorescent lights buzzing for an audience of two.

"How long have you been here?"

"Just arrived. How long have you been here?" Tui asked.

William checked the time on his monitor. The clock read 4:07 PM. He had sat down at 9:30 AM. "A while."

The silence lasted twelve seconds. William counted. "The part-time ID photos start next week," William said, because saying something safe was better than saying nothing, and saying nothing was better than saying the truth, and the truth was a room he wasn't ready to enter.

"The incoming students?"

"Yeah. Three days of headshots. Four hundred students."

"That sounds—"

"Mind-numbing."

"I was going to say useful. But mind-numbing works too."

"It pays. And it keeps my hands busy."

"Your hands need to be busy?" Tui's voice was gentle. He wasn't accusing. He was asking a genuine question. Tui looked at his phone. Typed something. Looked back at William. "Lego made Trifle. Want to join?"

The question landed differently than William expected. There was no judgment in it. There was no assumption that William had been wasting his time. There was just—an invitation. An opening. A door.

"Don't you want to be alone with him?" William said. "It could be a date."

Tui's expression shifted.

"A date?" Tui's voice was carefully neutral. "I messed up the last time we were alone, talking too much. The last thing I want is a date right now." He took another sip of coffee. "It's awkward."

"Since when is talking too much a problem for you?"

"Since I started talking about things that made Lego go quiet. And Lego going quiet is—" Tui paused. The next words seemed to cost him something. "Wrong. Like a song stopping in the middle of a note."

The silence between them filled with William's understanding. Tui was in love with Lego. Tui had been in love with Lego for some time, and the love was becoming harder to hide, harder to pretend was only friendship, harder to sustain in the register of casual affection when the underlying register wanted to be something else entirely.

"Awkward how?" William asked, and he meant it as a genuine question, a small offering of solidarity, one person who couldn't say the truth offering a moment of attention to another person who also couldn't say the truth.

"Awkward like—I don't know what register to use. Friend register? Something-else register? I've spent years using the friend register and now the something-else register keeps leaking through and I can hear it and I'm pretty sure he can hear it and neither of us is acknowledging it because acknowledging it would mean—" Tui stopped. Exhaled. "Anyway. Not a date. Trifle. Are you coming?"

William considered the invitation. The invitation to leave this room, leave the frames of Est, leave the solitude that had become less like refuge and more like isolation. The invitation to be part of something that wasn't work, wasn't the transaction of documentation, was just—people together.

"Okay," William said. "I'll come."

Tui made a sound—a small, happy, almost-involuntary noise that was closer to a hum than a word. His thumbs moved quickly on his phone, typing a response to Lego with the urgency of a person delivering good news.

"Come on," Tui said, standing. He glanced at William's monitor—the cyanotype wallpaper, the hidden folder, the evidence buried one click below the surface. "I'll pretend I didn't see the pictures of the new guy you were staring at so intently."

William's jaw tightened. "I was working on Lego's pictures."

"Of course you were."

The BTS was crowded at 4:30 PM—the car half-full of students, William and Tui stood

near the doors, holding the overhead rail, their bodies swaying with the train's movement.

The city scrolled past the windows. Concrete and glass and the green of trees that had survived the development. A temple's gold spire caught the sun and threw a blade of light across the car's interior, illuminating Tui's face for a moment before moving on.

"Things are awkward with Hong's new toy?" Tui asked.

William felt the word land. Toy. "Don't call him that."

Tui looked at him.

"Noted," Tui said. No defensiveness. No argument. Just the single word, the acknowledgment of a boundary, the adjustment made. "That's interesting."

"What is?"

"That you have a reaction to how I talk about him."

William looked away. Out the window. At the city that kept moving regardless of who was watching, who was caring, who was suffering in silence.

They were quiet for a station. The train stopped. People got on, got off. The automated voice announced the next stop in Thai and then in English, the English flat and toneless, the robotic pronunciation stripping the language of its music.

"Things aren't anything with Est. Things are—nothing. There's nothing to be awkward about."

"Okay."

"Can I ask you something?" William said.

"You're going to anyway."

"Would it be awkward?" William asked. "If you and Lego slept together?"

The question arrived unexpected, slightly wild, impossible to ignore. Tui's hand tightened on the overhead rail.

"Yes," Tui said. "It would be. Because I don't know how to act around him." He was looking out the window, not at William—the eye contact avoidance of a person who was being honest and who needed the privacy of a turned-away face to sustain the honesty. "I've spent a lot of time being his friend. I don't want to ruin it. But..."

"But?"

The train entered a tunnel. The windows went dark, and the car's interior was reflected in the glass—two young men standing side by side, one tall with ripped jeans and reading glasses, one shorter with careful skin and a camera around his neck, both holding the rail, both reflected in the dark glass like ghosts of themselves.

"But nothing," Tui said. "That's the problem. There's always a but, and the but never finishes. It just—hangs there. Like a sentence that got interrupted." He exhaled. "You and the model, though—you don't know each other. Maybe something good could come of it. And if not, at least it was a good one-night stand. You're young. People do it all the time."

William looked at him. "You sound like an old man."

"I'm twenty-two."

"You sound forty-two."

"I've been twenty-two for nine months and I've aged thirty years in that time." Tui's mouth twitched—the ghost of a smile. "Youth is wasted on the young. I read that somewhere. Or maybe Nut said it. He says a lot of things that sound like quotes even though I'm pretty sure he's just making them up."

"And it feels wrong to talk about Lego like that." William said quietly.

The smile faded. Tui nodded—slowly, the nod of a person who had heard himself and who didn't entirely like the sound.

"You're right," Tui said. "It does."

The train emerged from the tunnel. Light flooded the car. The reflected ghosts vanished, replaced by the real city—real buildings, real sky, real people on real platforms waiting for real trains. Tui sighed. The sigh was deep, structural, the sound of a load-bearing wall acknowledging its weight.

"Nut would kill me if he heard me say something like that." Tui said.

"Nut would give you a very calm, very thorough lecture about respect and then make you espresso and pretend nothing happened."

"That's worse than killing me."

"Much worse."

Lego's apartment building was the kind of structure that announced its price point before you entered it—the lobby all marble and glass, the concierge in a uniform that cost more than William's monthly rent, the elevator playing the kind of ambient

music that existed in the uncanny valley between pleasant and sinister. The building was in Thonglor, which was Bangkok's way of saying money lives here and is not embarrassed about it.

Tui entered the door code without hesitating.

"I really hope Lego doesn't go around giving his door code to everyone he thinks he can trust." Tui said as the door clicked open.

"How many people have it?"

"Us. Nut. Hong." Tui paused. "His cleaning lady. His sister."

"So, everyone."

"Lego's definition of 'trustworthy' is 'anyone who has made him laugh at least once.' Which is a very low bar."

The smell hit William first. A comforting blend of sweet cream, vanilla, moist sponge cake and fresh fruit—especially strawberries. The kind of scent that belonged in a home rather than in a showroom, that spoke of making rather than buying, of effort rather than acquisition.

Next to the door were some folded shipping boxes; one of them had a note in neat handwriting: "Eat more. You're too thin."—the handwriting of someone who cared enough to write. Nearby were plastic bags, the trash separated for recycling. The apartment unfolded as they entered—the high ceilings, the controlled chaos, the penthouse loft that looked like the collision point between a circus, a craft store, and a very expensive furniture catalog.

The living room was tidy—too tidy for Lego, William noted, which meant Lego had cleaned, which meant Lego had been expecting them, which meant Lego had been waiting. Which meant—

He's been alone.

The realization settled over William like a temperature change.

Lego's apartment, for all its silk and sequins and the pinned polaroids covering an entire wall, the handwritten notes and birthday cards and pressed flowers, felt less like a home and more like a museum of care. The blankets on the sofa—three of them, layered, the nest of a person who slept in the living room rather than in a bed. The oversized sweater draped over the armrest—Nut's, William recognized by the fit and the smell of green soap embedded in the fabric.

The aerial hoop—the lyra—hung from the ceiling at its lowest setting.

And Lego was upside down in it.

His body was inverted—legs hooked over the top of the hoop, arms extended below, fingertips barely brushing the crash mat. His hair hung straight down in a black curtain. He was wearing a sporty skirt with compression shorts underneath and a cropped top that showed the flat plane of his stomach, the muscles there visible not as bulk but as definition, the result of years of learning to move his body through space with precision and grace.

Barefoot. No makeup. No jewelry except the industrial piercing in his right ear.

He looked young.

Their eyes met.

"Liam!" Lego's face broke into the smile—the genuine one, not the performance version, the version that said I'm happy to see you without qualification or calculation.

And then he let go.

William's body moved before his brain could process the action. Three steps forward. But Lego didn't need catching. He landed on the crash mat with a thud that was louder than it should have been. He rolled once, his hair fanning out across the mat, and then he was on his back, looking up at the ceiling with an expression that mixed embarrassment with exhilaration.

"I'm fine," he said. "I didn't think you'd come."

"One day you're going to do that and break something important." Tui exhaled.

"You've been acting all weird since last week," Lego added, looking up at William from the mat. The words were casual. The eyes were not. The enormous brown eyes —no contacts, no enhancement, just the raw, unfiltered gaze of a person who noticed everything and hid the noticing behind brightness.

"I'm not weird."

"You're deeply weird. You've always been deeply weird. But this is a different weird." Lego sat up, his hair falling in messy curtains around his face. "This is the kind of weird where you stop answering the group chat and start looking at ceilings like they owe you money."

"I've been busy."

"You've been hiding. Those are different verbs."

William offered his hand. Lego took it. William pulled him up. The height difference was pronounced at this distance—Their hands remained connected for a moment longer than necessary.

Lego's kitchen was, like everything in the apartment, a paradox. The appliances were high-end—the kind of equipment that a professional chef would covet and that Lego used with the cheerful incompetence of someone who had learned to cook from YouTube tutorials and whose relationship with recipes was best described as aspirational.

Small cups of trifles were arranged ridiculously carefully in Lego's refrigerator—the layers visible through the glass cups, the colors coordinated, the presentation suggesting that someone had spent time thinking about how to make something functional beautiful.

They settled in the living room.

Lego on the floor, cross-legged, his back against the sofa. William on the sofa itself, his back against the armrest, his legs drawn up, his posture defensive but present. Tui in the armchair by the window, his long legs stretched out, his reading glasses pushed up on his forehead, his body language the opposite of William's—open, relaxed, the comfort of someone who had decided long ago not to guard his space.

The trifle was good. Better than good.

"This is actually incredible." William said.

"Don't sound so surprised." Lego smiled.

They ate in what William recognized as the Comfortable Silence. The kind of silence that happened between people who had spent enough time together that the silences didn't feel empty. Tui was watching him. William could feel the gaze.

"I should clean up the tattoo tonight." William said.

"The back piece?" Tui asked.

"Yeah. Nut said to keep it moisturized twice a day for the first two weeks."

"I can help if you need. Some of those spots are hard to reach on your own."

"Thanks."

Lego was watching them. His eyes moved between William and Tui with the specific, tracking, I am reading the room attention that made Lego simultaneously the easiest and the most dangerous person in the group to be around. Because Lego didn't just notice things—Lego noticed them with love, with care, with the determination of someone who believed that seeing people clearly was the highest form of respect.

"Liam." Lego said.

The name—the shortened, intimate version that only Lego used—landed in the

silence like a pebble in still water.

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

William's thumb pressed against his knuckle. The familiar nervous gesture, the tell that he was about to enter dangerous territory. "Sure."

"Are you okay?" The question was simple.

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You're the specific kind of not-fine where you smile and nod and hope no one notices that you haven't actually said anything real in four days." Lego's voice was gentle. Not confrontational—never confrontational. Lego didn't push through walls; he sat beside them and waited for the person inside to open the door.

William looked at his hands. The hands that had held a camera. The hands that had held Est's face. The hands that had—

He closed his eyes.

"He's different from us, Lego."

The words arrived like contraband, like something William had been smuggling through his own chest and had finally decided to declare. Lego didn't move. Didn't change expression.

"He lives in a world of contracts and agencies and campaigns that cost more than my tuition," William continued. His voice was low—not a whisper, but close. "He's met a lot of people better than me. He's a well-known model. I saw his social media—thousands of followers. Hundreds of thousands. And me?" William's laugh was small, bitter, directed inward. "I haven't even finished university."

Tui shifted in the armchair. William felt the shift.

"I noticed it on Saturday," William said. "At the party. The way he looked around the room. The way he didn't recognize anything. Not the venue, not the faces, not—" His voice caught. "Not me."

The catch was involuntary. The voice cracking on the final word, the whole architecture of his composure showing a hairline fracture.

"He doesn't remember it, or he pretends not to remember anything," William said. His eyes were still closed. "Maybe that's for the best."

The silence that followed was not empty. It was the silence of two people absorbing

a confession.

Lego spoke first. His voice was soft. "For the best how?"

"It's safer if he doesn't remember. If he remembers, then I have to be someone. Right now, I'm just the guy behind the lens." William opened his eyes. Looked at the cyanotype print on his phone case—the blue, the absence, the silhouette of a thing defined by the space around it. "I'm invisible. I like being invisible."

"Remember what?" Lego asked. Softly. The question that opened the door, that said: I'm here. I'm listening. You can tell me.

"That night. After the warehouse party. Weeks ago. Before all of this—before Hong started bringing him around, before Saturday. I—" The word caught. Stuck. The word was a confession and confessions required air and William's lungs had decided that air was a luxury.

He breathed.

"I went home with him."

"And I was—there. I was just there. I wasn't trying to—I didn't plan—" William's hands were moving now, the nervous gesture, the hands that usually held cameras and that were now holding nothing and that didn't know what to do with the nothing. "We talked. We walked. He smelled like—he smelled like something expensive and something broken. And then—"

He didn't finish the sentence.

Lego waited. Tui waited. The patience they offered was like a platform. A place to stand while gathering the courage to continue.

"It was my first time," William said. The sentence arriving smaller than the others, the volume decreasing as the vulnerability increased, the inverse relationship between openness and volume. "Not—my first time doing anything. But my first time with someone I didn't know. Someone I'd just met. At a party with cheap drinks and too much bass and—" He pressed his palms against his eyes. "I'm a cliché."

"You're not a cliché." Lego said.

"I'm literally the photography student who slept with the beautiful model at a party. If I submitted that as a screenplay, they'd reject it for being too predictable."

"You're not a cliché." Lego repeated, and this time there was steel in it. The steel of someone who had decided something was true and who would not be moved from that position.

Lego unfolded his legs. He moved from his spot on the floor, his body flowing like

water, like someone who had learned to move through space with intention. His chin resting on William's knee. "Liam," Lego said. "You've never been invisible. Not to me. Not to any of us."

"You know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, and I'm telling you that what you mean is wrong."

William thought about the railing. The frame on the Leica. The face that had forgotten it was a face. Or that had chosen to forget. Or that had never known it in the first place.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I don't know if he saw me at all. I don't know if that night was—real for him, or if I was just—" His hand made a small, frustrated gesture. "A warm body. A convenient presence. Something to hold onto because the alternative was holding onto nothing."

"You're not nothing, Will." Tui's voice, from the armchair. Quiet. Certain. The voice that anchored.

"I left."

"Before he woke up. And I—" William dropped his hands from his eyes. "I ran. I got dressed and I left. I didn't even—I couldn't stay. I couldn't face the morning light, the conversation, the moment where he looked at me and realized he'd made a mistake."

"Why?"

The question was simple. The answer was a labyrinth. William took a breath.

"Because—" He searched for the words. "Because in the morning, in the light, without the bass and the cheap drinks and the darkness, he was going to see me. Actually see me. And what was he going to see?" William's voice cracked. "A kid. A photography student who hasn't even graduated. Someone with an unfinished tattoo and a USB drive full of photos he's too shy to show anyone. Someone who irons his clothes so carefully because the last time he dressed the way he wanted to, people made sure he knew he was wrong."

The words came faster now. The dam had broken. The water was flowing.

"He was going to wake up," William said, "and realize he'd gone home with nobody. And I couldn't—I couldn't be the person who watched his face when he figured that out."

The apartment was very quiet.

Lego was quiet for a moment. His fingers moving at the bottom of William's pants,

playing with the fabric between them, the touch automatic, the comfort-seeking gesture. Lego's fingers were cold. His eyes went slightly distant—the expression of a person who was thinking, not about the conversation, but about something adjacent to it. Something he'd seen or heard or felt that was relevant but that he wasn't sure he should share.

"I think..." Lego said slowly. "I think he really doesn't remember."

William looked at him sharply. "What makes you say that?"

"The other day at P'Nut's studio. I heard P'Nut saying something strange to Est at the door—about questions. About being ready. About answers not going anywhere." Lego's voice dropped—the volume of a person who was sharing something he wasn't supposed to have heard. "I know he'd be annoyed that I was listening. I just—I don't know. I felt something was off when we met in the cafeteria and Hong invited him. Something in the way Est was looking around. At the walls. At the sketches. At us. The way he looked at me, like a tool. Like he was searching for something he couldn't name."

Tui was watching William. Watching his reaction. Measuring the impact of Lego's words.

"He's looking for whoever was in his bed that night." William said.

"He's looking," Lego agreed. "But he doesn't know who he's looking for."

"And if he finds out?"

"Then he finds out."

"And then what? Then I'm the guy who slept with a stranger at a party and couldn't handle the aftermath? Then I'm the guy who's been hiding in the same room as him, pretending I don't know what his skin feels like? Then I'm the—"

William stopped. His voice had risen—not to a shout, but above the careful, controlled register he usually maintained. Lego didn't flinch. Lego absorbed the volume the way crash mats absorbed impact—fully, quietly, without breaking.

"Do you think Nut will say anything?" William asked. His voice was back to its usual register—low, controlled. "If Est asks?" He didn't want to know and he desperately needed to know. The paradox sat in his chest like two magnets facing each other—repulsion and attraction, wanting to move toward and wanting to move away.

"I don't know," Lego said honestly. "P'Nut is—" He searched for the word. "P'Nut protects people. That's what he does. He'll protect you and he'll protect Est and if those two things conflict, he'll find a way to protect both of you at once, because that's what P'Nut does. That's his version of love."

William looked away.

Then he looked at Lego. Directly. The full, unmediated, eye contact that William usually avoided because eye contact was vulnerability, was invitation, was the opening of a door that William preferred to keep locked.

"Promise me you won't say anything." William said. The words were quiet. The words were the heaviest things in the room.

Lego held the gaze. The enormous eyes—warm, present, not judging. The eyes that saw William completely and that had decided to love what they saw.

"Let me bury the memory of me leaving with him that night," William said. "Let it stay buried. If he doesn't remember, then it didn't happen. If it didn't happen, then I don't have to be the person it happened to. I can just be—" He swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbing with the effort. "The photographer. The quiet one. The guy who takes pictures and stays in the background and doesn't—"

Doesn't get hurt.

The unfinished sentence was louder than the finished one would have been.

"I promise." Lego said.

The promise was—small. Two words. A simple declaration. But the promise was also a weight. William was asking Lego to carry a secret that was not his, to hold a silence that protected William but that also separated Est from the truth. He knew that asking Lego to promise was asking Lego to carry weight.

He knew that Lego would honor the promise even if the honoring cost him.

He knew that Lego would sit across from Est at future dinners and future parties and future afternoons in Nut's studio and would hold the secret behind his brightness and would not let it show.

He knew all of this and he asked anyway.

And the guilt arrived.

"Thank you." William said. His voice was almost inaudible.

"Liam?" Lego said.

"Yeah?"

"The thing about being invisible is that it works until it doesn't." Lego sat down on the floor, cross-legged, mirroring his position from before. "And when it stops working, it stops all at once. Like falling."

"Is that supposed to be comforting?"

"It's supposed to be true." Lego picked up his spoon. "Comfort comes later. First, you have to hit the mat."

William looked at him. At the bare nails. At the loose hair. At the eyes that saw everything and judged nothing. At the person who had decided, without being asked, to carry a secret that belonged to him now in all the ways that mattered.

"What if there's no mat?" William asked.

"There's always a mat," Lego said. "Sometimes it's a person. Sometimes it's a group of people who showed up with Trifle and bad metaphors and the willingness to sit on the floor for as long as it takes."

Tui caught his eye from the armchair. The look was brief—a fraction of a second, the length of a shutter click. But in that fraction, everything that needed to be communicated was communicated: I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. The door is still open.

William looked away first.

He always looked away first.